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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a reconsideration of John Dewey's theory of experience with particular emphasis on his notion of situational interactions. The paper asks what problems are created by a theory of experience that sees situations as a construction of only two worlds, internal and external, and carefully considers these issues. It first states that scholars working in the areas of spatial theory have contributed many new theories about the social construction of experience since 1938, and then explains that this analysis will rely upon the work of several spatial theorists, but primarily the work of Henri Lefebvre, as described in "The Social Production of Space" (1991). The paper concludes that Dewey's idea of interactions that occur in situations needs to be remapped to include a critical theory of power and difference that recognizes how experience is socially structured through the relationships between real, imagined, and social space. (Contains 3 references.) (BT)

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Spatiality & Experience in the Curriculum: A Remapping of Dewey's Theory of Experience

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Spatiality & Experience in the Curriculum: A Remapping of Dewey's Theory of Experience

In Experience & Education (1938), John Dewey set out to address what he saw as the problem of organization, or lack thereof, that was being attributed to the progressive schools of his time. Although he was very influential in the progressive school movement, he was concerned that progressive educators were simply turning their disdain for the structure of traditional schools into a kind of "anti-structure" that resisted a close consideration of alternative forms of organized schooling. For example, on p. 28 he states, "Just because traditional education was a matter of routine in which the plans and programs were handed down from the past, it does not follow that progressive education is a matter of planless improvisation." Dewey believed that all schools, whether traditional or progressive, are essentially about providing experiences that lead to growth. Thus, all school curriculums are structured by some assumptions about experience which organizes daily life in schools, even if a school considers itself to be "non-structured." His emphasis on experience was crucial because of its political importance to the progressive movement; experience forms contradictions to the claims of traditional knowledge. So, the primary question for Dewey was how can experiences in progressive schools be organized to promote growth without imposing on the democratic goals of the progressive movement?

Although Dewey asked this question sixty years ago, many educators consider it as legitimate and complex today as it was then.

Dewey's response was to detail a "Theory of Experience" that described the principles that structure experience as an integral feature of daily life. Dewey saw experience as inseparable from time and space. His principles of experience can be read as an interpretation of a time-space dialectic where time and space each have their own binary tensions. One of the principles of experience is "continuity." Emphasizing the temporal aspects of experience, continuity refers to the ways in which new experiences are understood through memories of past experiences and hopes for particular future experiences. All humans have a continuity of experience, but the different objective conditions of each person's experiences creates a need for educative experiences that are well-matched to the learner. The second principle of experience, "interaction," is more attentive to the spatial aspects of social relations. Experiences are structured by interactions that occur in the present between objects arranged in space, such as when an individual senses and makes meaning from either objects or other individuals that are within their view. Dewey focuses on the particular interaction between external, objective conditions and internal, mental conditions that together comprise what he refers to as a "situation." He contends that it is a linear sequence of lateral situations which comprise experience.

True to his pragmatic foundations, Dewey argued for "balance" between either/or propositions like either past or future and internal or external in order to achieve democratic conditions. His model of the time-space dialectic closely matches the notion of plotting the experience of the learner on an x-y graph, where "x" might represent the interaction between the internal and objective worlds while "y" might represent the temporal

continuity of experience between past and present. Finding the coordinates of the learner means that you can adequately organize experiences that will be educative and not imposing because you can know "the present" context.

For my paper, I am proposing a reconsideration of Dewey's Theory of Experience with particular emphasis on his notion of situational interactions. For instance, is "the present" as easily understood as Dewey's Theory of Experience suggests? Does Dewey's spatiality (defined as the interpretive aspects of human spatial existence) of experience place limits on the democratic possibilities of an organized educational plan because of the way it theorizes the present? In other words, what problems are created by a theory of experience that sees situations as a construction of only two worlds, internal and external? The purpose of my paper will be to carefully consider these questions. The following paragraphs in this proposal provide a rough outline of my arguments.

Scholars working in the areas of spatial theory have contributed many new theories about the social construction of experience since 1938. For my analysis, I will be relying upon the work of several spatial theorists, but I will primarily use the work of Henri Lefebvre as described in *The Social Production of Space* (1991). Like Dewey, Lefebvre acknowledges the existence of objective, or "real," spaces and internal, or "imagined," spaces (I will briefly explain these ideas, but they will need to be more fully developed in my paper). For Lefebvre, real space consists of those material objects and structures that are readily recognized, perceived, identified, quantified, objectified, and discussed. Imagined space is the representations of space that are coded through language and experienced as thoughts, ideas, plans, concepts, theories, laws, or memories. Objects, as real space, are only perceived and understood through their reference to imagined spaces. For

example, what is a "house" without a system of language and representation that gives recognition, meaning, and understanding to that object? Likewise, imagined space is constructed by real experiences; experiences in real space scripts subjectivity. It is difficult to imagine real spaces that have not been directly experienced in some manner.

At this point in Lefebvre's theory of space, it sounds much like Dewey's description of the situational interaction in that there are seemingly internal and external worlds that must be negotiated to construct a present context. The difference, however, is that Dewey's internal and external worlds exist as separate and objectified entities that need to be placed in a scientific state of "balance." On the other hand, Lefebvre's real and imagined spaces are distinct, but never separate. Objectivity and subjectivity are always in a state of dialectical inter-relations and inter-reactivity. That is to say, imagined space projects onto the physical world, while the physical world interjects into imagined space. Lefebvre does not seek to create a "balance" between the real and the imagined because they are both already and always there. For Lefebvre, the question is more about the ideological systems that structure the relationship between sense and meaning, between the real and the imagined. Some versions of the real-and-imagined dialectic are institutionalized to the exclusion of other versions of the real-and-imagined dialectic (Soja, 1996). Groups come to power through control over the ways in which space is talked about, organized, and lived. So, experiences with power are always related to spatiality.

Dewey's Theory of Experience is limited in examining the relationship between power and experience, and thus misses opportunities for different kinds of democratic organizations of experience in schools. Lefebvre contends that imagined space is the site of conceptual domination by those

who have access to the control of knowledge production. What we imagine the world to be is always limited by our own experience. Therefore, all plans for organizing social life are subject to the "field of vision" of those with the power to enact their desires for change. Part of the process of constructing imagined space in modern society is to institutionalize it so as to shape the subjectivities of the institutionalized, such as in the learners of the standard curriculum in public schools. The will of the elite is represented across space through the discourse of the curriculum.

However, Lefebvre recognized the resistance of many of the subjugated to the domination of certain forms of imagined space. He thus described a third space called "lived space" where new forms of social life emerge in opposition at the peripheries of normative orders. Lived space consists of describing alienating experiences, exploring artistic or symbolic representations, and creating and coding new spaces where identities can be constructed and experienced in marginal territories. In Dewey's theory, a mismatch between the imagined space and the real space was seen as the result of a *historical condition of past experiences* and space itself was not given a dialectical life *in the present*. In fact, Dewey went so far as to suggest that a continued mismatch between the real and the imagined in an individual is what leads to insanity (p. 44). Lefebvre's concept of lived space opens room for the recovery of experience that is both made and masked in interactions with real and imagined space. Lived space provides curricular possibilities for bringing to discourse previously repressed experiences that can be worked into a larger social critique and, hopefully, collective democratic action.

What my spatial critique of Dewey's Theory of Experience suggests is that the spatiality of experience is more than just a "lateral" negotiation of

inner and outer worlds along the more "linear" progression of time. People exist concretely in the present, while the past and the future are representations of places that do not exist in reality other than how they influence our interactions with the present. History and dreams are very important in that they influence our existence from moment to moment. However, the lessons of history and the promise of dreams can, ironically, only be realized through a new understanding of the present. How we read and experience space in the present has been much too ignored. For instance, if we cannot see power, domination, racism, classism, and sexism in the present, how can we ever act to transform it by creating new spatial organizations? The organization of experience should emphasize how experience itself is spatially organized through the relationships between real, imagined, and social space. In other words, we need a theory of experience that is of, by, and for space. Space should not be a backdrop to or container for experience. Instead, it should be a central subject-matter where social experiences are connected to, uncovered from, and organized around political and cultural relations. Dewey understood that political organization was central to democratic movements. However, his Theory of Experience did not adequately account for spatiality, which is at the heart of organization and experience. Dewey's idea of interactions that occur in situations needs to be remapped to include a critical theory of power and difference that recognizes how experience is socially structured through the relationships between real, imagined, and social space. In my paper, I will do considerably more explanation of the ideas I have presented in this proposal. I will also go into what a curriculum should be that would do justice to the connection between spatiality and experience. Hopefully, the implications of my research will be to organize a new project of educative experiences that radically assert

spatiality as central to experience, including the human experiences of domination, alienation, and collective resistance.

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